



BOOK REVIEW: AURANGZEB: THE MAN AND THE MYTH

AUTHOR: BIPLOVE KUMAR*

Aurangzeb: The Man and The Myth, By Audrey Truschke, Publisher: Penguin Random House, Gurgaon, 2017. Paper Back, Pages: 208, Price: 185. ISBN: 9780143442714.

6.1: INTRODUCTION:

“Often, the true purpose of ahistorically condemning Aurangzeb is to galvanise anti-Muslim

sentiments” – Audrey Truschke

In the age of social media ‘firmans’ history certainly is behind the bars. Politics, populism and post – truth decides - which history will get a bail and which should be kept behind the bars. In academic circles, the sense ‘Liberal Arts’ have overtaken the idea of doing history. It defines the popular culture under which the subject matter of ‘history’ is slowly being covered or precisely buried. Popular culture and professionalism have made peace with each other, which undermines the credibility of subject itself. But history itself is a product of certain times and spaces, from which it cannot be divorced. It is peaceful and at the same time it is brutal; but certainly it is not post truth or a myth. The ‘veracious face’ of history is often debated and legitimised through modern ethos (equality, justice, human rights, gender equality et al.) and political needs, which truly remains hysterical and not historical.

6.2: THE CONTEXT:

Audrey Truschke through her short biographical sketch “*Aurangzeb: The Man and the Myth*” explores the tough times or more precisely ‘the assault’, through which Indian history is

* ICSSR-Doctoral Fellow, Department of History, Sikkim Central University, biplovekumar26@gmail.com.



going through. She challenges contemporary popular imagination dipped into divisive fabricated theories - which tries to undermine the professional knowledge on sixth Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. After her contribution towards Indian history through “*Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at Mughal Court*”, a twitter firman positively asked Truschke to use her pen for “*Aurangzeb Alamgir*”.

Truschke took the arduous task to take the man out of the myths - which not only hounds him but, also legitimise communal tensions that grips India’s Muslims and their existence today. This book thus represents the ideas of a historian disturbed by the overlapping of history sans professionalism. Without being an apologist to History itself, Truschke approaches the man who was not only the ruler of one of world’s largest and richest dynasty; but also ruled for a half century. On her methodology Truschke writes:

Historians seek to comprehend people on their own terms, as products of particular times and places, and explain their actions and impacts. We need to absolve those we study of guilt, and we certainly do not need to like them. But we strive to hold back judgement long enough so that the myth of Aurangzeb can fade into the background and allow room for a more nuanced and compelling story to be told. (Truschke 2017:11).

The narrative of Truschke explores several aspects of Aurangzeb, which are little known today. Through her short and racy eight chapters, she adds historical depth to the subject. From his early life as governors of various provinces to his brutal occupation of throne and to his mundane and utterly humane last days; Truschke’s historical understanding remains placed on a strong footing. But apart from the various phases of Aurangzeb’s life, the book should be read as a manifesto against the popular culture, where all Muslims is being targeted as ‘*Aurangzeb or Babur ki aulad*’ (son of Aurangzeb) and which tries to alienates them as from their Indian entity. It is a noted fact in history that Aurangzeb was a zealous Musalman or termed as *Zinda Pir* and his acts were conservative in nature but; but he prioritises himself as Mughal king first. Truschke delves into the ruler’s reign as constantly evolving in interaction between the whole complexities and paradoxes – political, administrative, economic, cultural, religious et al.. It is true that Aurangzeb destroyed temples, re – imposed *Jizya* (religious tax) on Hindus, banned music in his courts, banned the festival of *Holi*; but he also banned alcohol opium, prostitution, gambling and duly censored Muslims’ celebration too. Truschke writes:



In the eighth year of his reign Aurangzeb constrained robust festivities on Nauroz, the Persian New Year, and the major Muslim holidays of Eid al – Fitr and Eid al – Adha, cancelling ‘celebrations on grand scale. (Truschke 2017: 93)

Aurangzeb did not go against temples in south India, but in north India he destroyed the temple which contained legal and political authority. And that too which went against his authority. In Aurangzeb’s eyes Islamic teachings and the Mughal tradition enjoined him to protect Hindu temples, pilgrimage destinations, and holy men. He was a man obliged towards dispensing justice. Truschke further writes:

Aurangzeb’s notion of justice included certain measure of freedom of religion, which led him to protect most places of Hindu worship. Mughal rulers in general allowed their subjects great leeway – shockingly so compared to the draconian measures instituted by many European sovereigns of the era – to follow their own religious ideas and inclinations. Nonetheless, state interests constrained religious freedom in Mughal India, and Aurangzeb did not hesitate to strike hard against religious institutions and leaders that he seemed seditious or immoral. But in absence of such concerns, Aurangzeb’s vision of himself as an even – handed ruler of all Indians prompted him to extend state security to temples.(Truschke 2017:102)

Truschke through several such examples based on evident facts, tries to bridge the gap between the professional and public image of a ruler. And by doing that she challenges the populist assaults that the subject matter of history faces today. Medieval era remains deep rooted in its times and complexities; and so does the man named Aurangzeb. Every history remains a contemporary history as Coerce had defined it, but utilising episodes to create a myth or post truth or to divide masses cannot be termed as history. We should not let our imagination to be thrown away by the phenomenon known as ‘seductive charm of history’. Nobody knows the exact number of temples destroyed by Mughals or Marthas; but certainly the citizen of Republic India did not participate in that. For present, History provides us lessons for consideration and Truschke intervention remains as such. Aurangzeb was an enigmatic king sans the brutal simplification that he faces today. Audrey Truschke concludes her summarization in following words and these lines remains the strength of the book and of a historian:



Aurangzeb nonetheless defies easy summarization. He was man of studied contrasts and perplexing features. Aurangzeb was pre occupied with order – even fretting over the safety of roads – but found no alternative to imprisoning his father, an action decried across much of Asia. He did not hesitate to slaughter family members, such as Dara Sukoh, or rip apart enemies, literally, as was the case with Sambhaji. He also sewed prayer caps by hand and professed a desire to lead a pious life. He was angered by bad administrators, rotten mangoes, and unworthy sons. He was a connoisseur of music and even fell in love with the musician Hirabai, but, beginning in midlife, deprived himself of the pleasure of musical arts. Nonetheless, he passed his later years largely in company of another musician, Udaipuri. He built the largest mosque in the world but chose to be buried in an unmarked grave. He died having expanded the Mughal kingdom to its greatest extent in history and yet feared failure.(Truschke 2017:138-39)

6.3: CONCLUSION:

To conclude, there remains much to say about this intriguing monarch who is beyond the popular myths, rhetoric, false binaries and post truth of our times.